

THE MENTAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE DEAF CHILD.

BY

EDWARD M. GALLAUDET,

WASHINGTON, D. C.

Reprinted from the
Transactions of the American Laryngological, Rhinological and Otological Society,
1910.

THE MENTAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE DEAF CHILD.

By EDWARD M. GALLAUDET, Washington, D. C.

(By Invitation).

The condition of the mind of an uneducated deaf child which differs from that of the normal child may be described by the single word deaf-mutism.

The phenomena of deaf-mutism arrange themselves in two distinct divisions, namely, the physical and the psychical.

Physical deaf-mutism will be readily understood as consisting in mere organic deafness, and consequent dumbness, while psychical deaf-mutism includes the mental and moral conditions induced by and growing out of the physical disability.

It may be said of deaf-mutes as a class that their physical deaf-mutism cannot be entirely removed. Their deafness has hitherto baffled the relieving hands of the surgeon and the physician. Their dumbness has only partially yielded before the persistent efforts of teachers of speech, to whose patience and skill all praise is due.

It is, therefore, upon psychical deaf-mutism that the attention of the teacher should be chiefly fixed, to the complete removal of which, in a vast majority of cases, no inherent or insurmountable obstacles present themselves.

Psychical deaf-mutism may be considered under three subdivisions, viz., (1) Mental, (2) Moral, and (3) Social.

In the mental development of the deaf-mute, the great and peculiar obstacle is his lack of language. That marvelous process by means of which the hearing child, between his first and fourth year, possesses himself, without conscious effort, of his mother tongue, and sometimes even gains two or three languages, has no counterpart in the experience of the uneducated deaf child; and as a consequence he lacks not only the language, but all that mental discipline and growth which are incident even to the vernacular acquirement of language.

That the untaught deaf-mute has methods of thought is undoubtedly true. But the necessary crudeness of them will appear from the reflection that as he works them out, he can only imperfectly call to his aid the imitative faculty. He must originate

almost everything, and arrive at just conclusions only after blunders infinitely more numerous than those of the hearing child.

Even in the imperfect development possible to the uneducated deaf-mute, the necessity of *some* language becomes apparent. Failing to learn that of his fellows, he will invent one of his own, and impose its use on all who will accept it. And when the indifference, or hardheartedness of his family or associates denies him the use of this, he lapses into a condition but slightly elevated above idiocy.

In proof of this an instance may be cited which fell under the speaker's notice some years ago, of a girl who had been held as a household drudge or slave by her family, till in her sixteenth year she was brought through the interference of her humane neighbors, to a school where she might be taught. On entering she presented evidences of idiocy that were thought to be unmistakable.

Premature discrepitude of form, with crooked claw shaped fingers, and a face utterly expressionless, were taken as plain tokens of mental feebleness.

A few months, however, of the ordinary treatment of a school for the deaf, wrought what seemed almost a miracle. Rest from exhausting labor allowed the fingers to relax and the form to straighten; kindness lighted smiles in a face that had lost, if it had ever possessed, the power of changing its expression; patient instruction reached, at length, the awakened intellect, and at the end of a year eager, happy intelligence was in process of healthy development where there seemed before to have been no germ of mental life.

The language of pantomime suffices for the ordinary development of the intellectual faculties. A deaf-mute who never learns a language of words, may still be taught much as to the operations of the natural world: something of history and geography, not a little of science and mathematics, the laws and usages of society, and the principles and precepts of religion.

But this will not relieve him from his mental deaf-mutism.

Having no language in common with his fellow men; shut out from the stores of information and food for thought conserved in books; unable to acquaint himself with even the news of the day as chronicled in the journals; often excited and perhaps tormented with thoughts and queries for which he has no means of exact expression, his mind may be likened to an eagle caged or a lion chained. He will either lapse into the contentedness of ignoble bondage, or drag out an unhappy existence, beating at

bars, or chafing in fetters from the thralldom of which he is powerless to free himself.

The question naturally rises in the mind of a philanthropic person: "Is there no way of escape from so sad a condition?"

Happily an affirmative answer may be found in the history of every well ordered school for the deaf. Among those taught many will appear who remaining physically deaf are no longer dumb, or in the condition of mental deaf-mutism.

Their processes of thought, their methods of reasoning, their modes of expression, are the same as those of hearing persons, with the exception that verbal language is to them *only* visible, whether coming to them from the lips or hands of others, or from the printed page, and not visible or audible according to circumstances.

Another exception should also be made, that a person born and continuing totally deaf can have no appreciation of the phenomena of sound.

But this is not true of that rather large proportion of the deaf who have had hearing for several years. To them the mental condition of deaf-mutism does not in any degree appertain, and the extent to which they can appreciate the phenomena of sound has been aptly described by one of their own number in a sonnet.

"They are like one who shuts his eyes to dream
Of some bright vista in his fading past;
And suddenly the faces that were lost
In long forgetfulness before him seem—
'Th' uplifted brow, the love lit eyes whose beam
Could ever o'er his soul a radiance cast,
Numberless charms that long ago have askst
The homage of his fresh young life's esteem;
For sometimes, from the silences they bear,
Well up the tones that erst formed half their joys—
A strain of music floats to the dull ear,
Or low melodious murmur of a voice,
Till all the chords of harmony vibrant are
With consciousness of deeply slumb'ring powers."

We pass to the consideration of the second feature of psychical deaf-mutism, namely, that which pertains to the development of the moral nature.

The untaught deaf-mute is either wholly devoid of language, or possesses it in a very imperfect degree.

In the first case, if he continue without language, his moral development is an impossibility. In the latter case the readiness with which his moral perceptions may be awakened, and his moral powers trained increases with the growth of his faculty of language.

That an uneducated deaf-mute should be morbid, suspicious, jealous, selfish, unreliable and dependent, will seem most natural when one considers at how terrible a disadvantage he remains as compared with his hearing fellows; and to how small an extent his mind has been affected by those influences, which naturally eliminate these undesirable moral qualities from the human character.

It must be observed that we have not claimed the possession of verbal language as necessary to the moral development of the deaf-mute. His natural language of signs will suffice for this: that is to say for imparting the essentials of a moral character.

The speaker is, however, of the opinion that, other things being equal, the deaf person who has a perfect command of verbal language, has a decided advantage even in points of moral development, over one whose habit is to think in signs.

That moral deaf-mutism can be entirely removed by the methods now employed in our best schools, admits of no question. That is to say that the standard of moral character among the graduates of our schools for the deaf will be found to be quite as high as that of persons with all their faculties, who have had an equal amount of education.

In providing means for the moral and religious training of deaf children in schools, practice differs as to the employment of the sign language.

In the opinion of the speaker the use of this language in addressing considerable numbers of deaf persons, whether children or adults, is of great value.

In this view he is sustained by two of the leading schools in Germany, both of which are oral schools, and one of which is the cradle of the oral method.

When we consider social deaf-mutism it goes without saying that the deaf-mute, denied all language must remain a social cipher. Given only the sign language, his enjoyment of social privileges is of course limited to the narrow circle of those who can use that language. If we add verbal language, even without speech or the power of lip-reading, we widen the social range very greatly. And those deaf-mutes who are so fortunate as to

possess the power, and are granted the opportunity of acquiring these last named accomplishments to a degree reasonably approaching perfection, may, without doubt, aspire to complete enfranchisement from social deaf-mutism.

Whether conditions between the hearing and the deaf are such as to enable the latter, in large numbers to realize this aspiration is a question.

It is an oft repeated assertion that when a deaf person has acquired the power of speech, and is able to read the lips of others he is "restored to society."

In a recent letter a deaf lady of high social standing and unusual mental ability, who was educated in an oral school, writes as follows:

"It seems to me the pure oral teachers expect too much of both the deaf and the hearing. They think that the former should be capable of an equality with the latter, which, is physically impossible. They think the hearing should receive the deaf with open arms, or at least meet them half way. They ought to, of course, but the practical question is, do they? In most cases, No. Where there are deaf friends or relatives, something of interest and kindness will be shown by the hearing, but with ordinary people the deaf are simply strange creatures, like the idiotic or insane, though of course in a less degree."

"The great majority of oralists are absolutely ignorant of the way they are laughed at behind their backs. I myself knew nothing of this while I had home and family to ensure me respect, but I have had some bitter experiences since then."

"For this reason, if for no other, those with bad voices should *not* be forced to talk. They simply make themselves a laughing stock among the hearing. I have been told that my voice was not specially disagreeable, yet I have known hearing friends to pass me on the street without recognition, and when I demanded an explanation confess that they did not wish the friends they happened to be with, to hear me speak."

"Is not that enough to seal the lips of any sensitive oralist?"

"In all this I am putting myself in strong antagonism to my school, but it is not to be helped. Truth and common sense should be considered as well as theory, and with the theories of the pure oralists I cannot agree."

In many of our large cities and towns associations of the deaf exist.

The meetings of these societies are for social enjoyment, with

lectures in the sign language on subjects of interest, and for religious worship.

These associations are condemned by some as tending to isolate the deaf from the hearing, thus making their social deaf-mutism permanent.

We cannot join in this condemnation, though our advice to the deaf has always been to mingle with the hearing as much as possible, and not to depend for all their social enjoyment on intercourse with each other.

It is natural for the deaf to come together socially and they should not be denied that pleasure.

But especially should they be sustained when they seek to have religious instruction and worship in that language in which, alone, such instruction can be given, and such worship can be conducted, in a manner to be understood by a considerable number of persons.

The lady from whose letter a quotation was read a few minutes ago writes as follows on this matter:

"I insist on signs, and signs only, in public speaking to the deaf. On March 20th, 1910, I was present at the confirmation service at Trinity Church, Boston, where Mr. Searing interpreted to us the sermon of Bishop Lawrence. When I came to read the printed report of that sermon I found nothing new. I had understood the greater part from the gestures of Mr. Searing. Had I been seated with the general audience I should not have known a word from beginning to end."

Society may offer to the individual deaf-mute social recognition, and many testimonials of thoughtful consideration which he has no right to demand.

In any neighborhood where an educated deaf-mute may have taken up his residence, the work of relieving him of his social deaf-mutism should go on. A little patience and painstaking to establish easy communication; a little exercise of self-denial; the acceptance of the deaf-mute neighbor as a *fellow man*, and not always as a deaf-mute, will in process of time perfect the work begun by his teachers in school, emancipating him so fully from the trammels of mental and moral deaf-mutism, as to make him often forget the burden of the heavy trial which must still rest upon him, when all shall have been done that the good will of his fellow men can devise and suggest.